



THE MEDIA GAZE

**Representations of
Diversities in Canada**

Augie Fleras



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Preface

To say that Canada is a society of diversities and difference is surely an understatement. Canada represents an extremely diverse society in terms of new Canadians and racialized minorities, including over two hundred different ethnic groups, as well as some eighty distinct Aboriginal nations. In addition to its racial, ethnic, and Aboriginal differences, Canada is home to class diversities, ranging from ruling to working to underclass; diversities in gender, including the transgendered and intersexed; and diversities associated with religion, sexual orientation, and age. Difference is no less prevalent a reality. In contrast to the descriptive terms “diversities” and “differences,” both of which denote human variation along physical, cultural, social, and psychological lines, references to “difference” connote a more politicized concept that contextualizes diversities within a contested framework of inequality and power. To the extent that mainstream media have proven diversity-friendly by embracing superficial differences yet difference-averse in rejecting deep differences and politicized diversities, the distinction is critical.

The profusion of diversities and difference in Canada cannot be denied. Expressions of politicized diversities (i.e., difference) include, among others, the politics of aboriginality, the proliferation of identity politics around race or gender, and the politicization of sexuality in claiming public space. Nor should we refute the reality of both government and institutional initiatives for accommodating diversities and difference. On one side are equity-based initiatives for levelling the playing field, including those under the Employment

Equity Act or a gender-based analysis as policy-making framework. On the other side are diversity-inspired models for accommodating different ways of accommodating difference(s) related to the status and rights of Aboriginal peoples, the place of Quebec within an English-speaking Canada, and the increasingly politicized demands of immigrants and racialized minorities (Fleras 2010). On yet another side are the human rights statutes and Charter provisions that purport to protect and empower those whose differences are disadvantaging.

Principles are one thing; practices are proving to be something else. However valorized as a relatively open and tolerant society that abides by the multicultural principle of inclusiveness (Ibbitson 2005; Adams 2007), Canada's commitment to institutional inclusion has left much to be desired. Good intentions notwithstanding, institutions have generally fumbled the challenge of inclusiveness, largely because prevailing notions of "how things should be done around here" remain deeply etched within (1) institutional design and organization, (2) working assumptions, (3) operational protocols and procedures, and (4) organizational outcomes. In that the foundational principles of mainstream institutions are likely to remain structured in dominance, the prospect of transformative change is iffy at best.

Mainstream media are no inclusionary exception to this exclusionary rule. Yes, compared to the past, mainstream media are generally more inclusive in representing diversities and difference (Gauntlett 2008). Both the quantity and quality of media representations have improved to the point where critics (McGowan 2001) now vilify these improvements as a political correctness gone wild. Yet there is also a less flattering spin. Lip service to the contrary, too many media messages remain stuck in the past. When not ignored as irrelevant or inferior, those demographics considered diverse and different are routinely framed as "troublesome constituents" who constitute problems in their own right or who create problems involving cost or inconvenience. Even initiatives for accommodating diversities and difference continue to be mired in controversy or marred by inconsistencies – thanks to an array of conflicting priorities and stubborn agendas. Not surprisingly, the interplay of institutional biases with organizational priorities continues to advance dominant interests and agendas, often at odds with those of diversities in Canada, with the result that audiences rarely get what they want but end up wanting what the media want them to have.

In acknowledging a need for challenge and change, this book addresses (describes, analyzes, and explains) the logic behind media (mis)representations

of diversities and difference against a backdrop of Canada's evolving media-scape. The book is anchored in a simple yet powerful theme: that mainstream media exist primarily as channels of persuasion whose primary objective is implicitly consistent yet expertly concealed – namely, to convert and co-opt audiences into “*seeing like the media*,” as if this media gaze was untouched by bias or perspective. The implications of this media-centred (mediacentric) gaze are inescapable. In decoding how mainstream media encode (frame) images of diversities and difference, institutional designs and media processes are exposed as raced, gendered, and classed, as well as sexualized, secularized, and ageist. This book also addresses how the fundamental principles of the media's foundational order remain structured in dominance because of media gazes that extol the normalcy and normativeness of whiteness, Eurocentrism, secularism, heterosexism, and androcentrism. Even the popularity and power of social networking media, with all its democratic and liberating potential, may not have as much transformative clout in challenging a mainstream media gaze as many have anticipated (Hackett and Anderson 2010).

The goal of this book is both constructive and deconstructive: to analyze media constructions of diversities and difference by deconstructing the logic and dynamics of a blinkered media gaze. This critically (de)constructive tone is predicated on the premise that there is nothing normal or inevitable about what we see, hear, or experience, despite media efforts to naturalize their representational gazes. To the contrary, mainstream media messages continue to reflect, reinforce, and advance discourses in defence of dominant ideology. The agendas, interests, and priorities of those who own or control media are embraced as desirable or inevitable, yet are expertly concealed so that the resultant media gaze comes across as natural and normal rather than constructed and contested. The explanatory value of a media gaze for understanding the what, why, and how is crucial not only in securing an analytical framework for seeing through a seeing like the media, but also in pinpointing the politics and dynamics of a media-centred gaze as demonstrated below:

- We live in an information society. In the absence of personal experiences for understanding social reality, media secure a preliminary and/or primary point of contact with the world out there, often without individual awareness or resistance. In that sense, media are primarily a socializing institution of social control (Crichter 2006; Kimmel 2008).
- How do mainstream media construct images of race, ethnicity, and aboriginality; women and gender relations; the poor and the working classes; and

the historically disadvantaged, including gays and lesbians, youth and elderly, and religious minorities? Are constructions based on a relatively accurate appraisal of reality or, alternatively, are images refracted through the prism of preconceived notions that privilege whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity. But what kind of information is yielded when media messages about diversities and difference are raced, classed, and gendered as normal and acceptable?

- On the assumption that media representations of diversities and difference constitute mainstream projections rather than minority realities (M.J. Miller 2008), do media images of race, gender, and class say more about the fantasies or fears of those doing the projecting than about the experiences and aspirations of those projected?
- Are mainstream media too accommodative of differences or not accommodative enough? Is there any truth to the accusation that news media embrace a corrosive political correctness that recoils from criticizing either minority actions or diversity initiatives for fear of courting accusations of racism (McGowan 2001)?
- The verdict on media inclusiveness is inconclusive, with signs of progress alongside patterns of resistance. Why, then, are some media processes such as advertising inclusive of diversities and difference, whereas other media processes – for example, newscasting – seemingly stagnate?
- Why is it that mainstream media are diversity-friendly (i.e., they accommodate superficial differences – an empty pluralism) yet difference-averse (i.e., they reject deep difference unless it is depoliticized or whitewashed)? Is it because of attitudes or structure? Can fundamental change be advanced by tinkering with the conventions that refer to the rules? Or is the onus on challenging those foundational rules that inform media conventions?
- What responsibility do mainstream media have in facilitating the integration of diversities and difference? If responsibility prevails, what is the appropriate role? Should differences be ignored by emphasizing commonalities, even at the risk of glossing over identities? Should differences be foregrounded despite risks in reinforcing stereotypes?
- Many concur that mainstream media are raced, gendered, classed, ageist, and Eurocentric. Is it logically or existentially possible for mainstream media to become de-raced, de-classed, and de-gendered? What would such a media look like in a world where, ideologically speaking, there is no position from nowhere?
- What are the implications of seeing like the media in a wireless world where the new media are competing with mainstream media for placement and

primacy in Canada's mediascape (Lee 2010)? Does a "power to the ordinary people" implicit within populist and social media portend the possibility of a more democratic gaze (G. Turner 2010)?

There is much of value in the belief that true insight arises from asking the right questions. But as this book amply demonstrates, responses to these questions are neither readily forthcoming nor wholly accepted. Each of the themes yields an astonishing range of often conflicting responses that elude any consensus or certainty. And yet, exploring these issues in a mediated world both rapidly changing and increasingly diverse is necessary and relevant – *necessary* because everybody must become more critically reflective of what it means to live in our richly saturated media world; *relevant* because the blueprint for living together with our diversities and difference relies on the media to do their part in empowering Canadians accordingly. Perhaps *The Media Gaze* will equip Canadians with the insight and initiative for advancing the prospects of living together with our differences, equitably, and in dignity.

THE MEDIA GAZE

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part 1

Seeing Like the Mainstream Media

Canadians live in a mediated world. Few would dispute the centrality of mainstream media as an information source with persuasive powers to motivate or manipulate. But many believe that while others are susceptible to media's intoxicating brew of persuasion and fantasy, they themselves are largely immune to media messages – a mistaken belief that, paradoxically, bolsters the industry's powers of persuasion. Rather than a frivolous diversion for amusement or distraction, mainstream media are influential in framing who we think we are, what we think about, the nature of our experiences, how we relate to others, and how they relate to us. Media coverage draws attention to some aspects of reality as normal and necessary – primarily by focusing on what issues to think about, how to think about these issues, and whose voices will prevail in public discourses. Other aspects of reality are framed as inferior or inconsequential and dismissed accordingly. In short, far from passively reflecting a so-called objective world “out there,” the media actively contribute to constructing public discourses about this mediated reality. When mainstream media provide a relatively accurate rendition of social reality, they are doing their job. But when conflict-driven and celebrity-obsessed coverage prevails over wisdom and insight, mainstream media may be doing a disservice to Canadians.

Nowhere are the politics and provocations more evident than in the framing of diversities and difference. Evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates how mainstream media have faltered in depicting women, racialized minorities, youth and the elderly, working classes, and homosexuality (Wilson, Gutiérrez, and Chao 2003). Those outside the framework of a preferred demographic have been either ignored as irrelevant or stigmatized as inferior. Alternatively, they have been portrayed as troublesome constituents who posed a threat to society because of their problematic status. Media coverage of marginalized demographics has embraced a set of binary oppositions (“us” versus “them”) that has compromised their status in society (van Dijk 1995; Cushion 2004). To the extent that media have been reflective of reality, the prevailing media gaze has reflected the realities of those who owned or controlled what people consumed and communicated.

But yesterday's agendas are today's challenges (Gauntlett 2008). An exclusive reliance on monocultural frames as prevailing media gazes are relinquishing ground to depictions more reflective of and responsive to diversities and difference. Both the quantity and quality of representations in new and conventional media have improved to the point of guarded optimism (Hier 2008, 2010). However commendable these moves toward inclusivity are, contradictions prevail, as demonstrated by the following inconsistencies:

- 1 In theory, media institutions are under pressure to incorporate minority inclusiveness in line with Canada's multicultural principles, provisions of the Broadcasting Act, and human rights protocols. In reality, however, patterns of inclusiveness have proven erratic, shallow, and tokenistic in challenging traditional representations of minorities.
- 2 The gendered nature of mass media communication persists as well. Women and men continue to stand in a different relationship to media because of a privileged male gaze as the unquestioned media norm that defines acceptability and legitimizes normalcy.
- 3 In that media institutions remain in the hands of big business and corporate interests, depictions of the working classes, labour unions, and the undeserving poor tend to be slanted accordingly.
- 4 Other minority sectors of society are marginalized as well. Young men are routinely discredited as a problem demographic in need of monitoring and control. Their interests, realities, and accomplishments are routinely discarded in favour of delinquency frames. References to the elderly are no less unflattering because of their diminished status as nonproductive members of society.
- 5 Both gays and lesbians are finally receiving the kind of exposure that historically eluded their grasp. Nevertheless, depictions of homosexuality remain problematic, with seemingly progressive coverage undercut by the superficial and stereotypical – in part to placate the squeamishness of audiences and advertisers in seeing what was once unsightly.
- 6 The politics of religion at both national and international levels has leapt to the forefront in challenging the prospect of living together with differences. But this emergent reality is poorly reflected in media depictions of religiosity, religion, and religious differences for reasons that are not yet fully understood.

Does it matter? Should we care? Can anything be done? Regardless of the response or assessments, the cumulative effect of mixed media messages exacts a cost. Because media gazes are known to conceal as much as they reveal, media representations are pivotal in defining what is normal, acceptable, or desirable. For audiences who lack meaningful first-hand contact with diversities and difference, these representations are taken at face value, despite their potential to distort or inflame. They are no less powerful in circumscribing the lives and life chances of those framed as dangerous or diminished. The images conveyed by media gazes may be constructed; nevertheless, the construction of these images constitutes the lived realities for minorities

and diversities whether they like it or not. The conclusion seems inescapable: media representations of diversities and difference persist with respect to women, racialized minorities, Aboriginal peoples, and the poor and working classes, in addition to youth, homosexuals, and faith-based communities. These so-called demographics continue to be under-represented in areas that count, overrepresented in areas that don't count, and misrepresented on both accounts. That alone should be cause for concern, a commitment to action, and a catalyst for change.

Chapter 1 addresses these core questions: (1) What are media? (2) What do the media say they are doing? (3) What do the media really do? and (4) How do media matter in (mis)representing diversities and difference? Canada's mediascape comprises four sectors, each of which is animated by a different logic that informs content, relationship to audience, and corresponding patterns of media gaze. Particular attention is devoted to the idea that media gazes in general, and news media coverage in particular, may be interpreted as though they are systemically biasing because of consequences rather than intent. Chapter 2 theorizes the concept of a media gaze. By decoding those media gazes that frame (or encode) representations of diversities, the chapter focuses on deconstructing (decoding) the conventions behind a seeing like the media. Accounting for representations of diversities in this book taps into a recurrent theme. Biases that inform the media gaze are shown to be structural rather than attitudinal, institutional rather than individual, patterned rather than random, and consequential (systemic) rather than deliberate (systematic). That insight provides a sobering reminder of the obstacles that await in deconstructing media gazes for seeing through a seeing like the media.

1

Disassembling Media Representations 101

Mainstream media are thought to communicate by providing information and entertainment. However trite but true that may be, mainstream media do more than tabulate and transmit. More accurately, they communicate by manipulating patterns of persuasion while suspending belief to achieve the desired effect of drawing audiences into seeing like the media. Nor is there any validity to claims that mainstream media are neutral and dispassionate conveyors of information. To the contrary, they are laced with commercial values, systemic biases, and hidden agendas that draw attention to mainstream aspects of reality as normal and necessary. Other aspects are discredited as irrelevant or inferior or problematic because they fall outside normative standards. Inasmuch as media cannot not communicate (in part because communication is receiver dependent), media representations of diversities are filtered through a prevailing media gaze.

The end result of such one-sidedness is entirely predictable, if unnerving: mainstream media not only constitute tools of persuasion in articulating right from wrong, acceptable from non-acceptable, normalcy from the deviant, and what counts from who doesn't. They also reinforce vested interests and priorities by consolidating patterns of power and privilege contrary to democratic principles (Hackett and Anderson 2010). The representational content of media persuasion is not necessarily deliberate (systematic); rather, the largely slanted coverage of media content tends to be systemically biasing owing to its predominantly negative messages. In that mainstream media portrayals can be